The Kundera Case and the Neurotic Collective Memory of Postcommunism

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History is a battlefield of present politics. Dealing with the past reveals the power struggles and strategies of the present. Past events are both denounced and glorified by political agents of the present hoping to weaken their enemies.

However, the past also contains injustices and political crimes and any decision not to deal with them in the present only reaffirms them and confirms the unjust status of their victims. Not to contend with the past injustices thus compromises the legitimacy of the present system of positive law.

To deal, or not to deal with the past, indeed, is an important question. However, it is also inseparable from questions of which past is to be dealt with and how.

The Kundera Case

On Monday, 13th December 2008, a Czech weekly magazine *Respekt* published information that Milan Kundera, the most distinguished Czech novelist, apparently reported a young man and agent Miroslav Dvořáček to the state police on 14th March 1950. The denunciation nearly resulted in a death sentence for Dvořáček who eventually spent 14 years in communist prisons.

At that time, Kundera was a student of the Academy of Film Arts who had just been expelled from the communist party. These circumstances led to speculations regarding his possible fear of further persecution, including the possibility of criminal charges for not reporting a suspect stranger who stayed overnight at the student dormitory of which Kundera was a senior student supervisor.

Kundera, a former enthusiastic young communist who nevertheless distanced himself from the official ideology in the early days of the Czechoslovak communist regime in the 1950s and subsequently dedicated a number of his novels to the unmasking of the ‘communist kitsch’, thus became suspected of hiding his own skeleton in the closet like so many other intellectuals and artists of the last century. The mass media were locked in heated debates whether Kundera’s work could therefore be interpreted as a kind of apology for morally repulsive deeds from times of ‘the artist as a young man’. This has similarities, for instance, with the story of a Hungarian film director István Szabó who collaborated with the secret police between 1957 and 1963 and wrote some 47 reports about his friends and teachers.

Scandalizing, or dealing with the past? Reflections on the Kundera case

Is the Kundera case yet another example of history catching up with its subjects, or is it rather an example of Kundera's skeptical view of humankind always preferring judging to thinking, in this case judging the writer's actions irrespective of whether they had actually happened?

This extraordinary case is a good example of the state of historical research dealing with the Czech communist past, its representation in media, and perceptions by the public. The most striking fact is that the information was forwarded to the weekly *Respekt* by Adam Hradilek who was a young researcher of the *Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes* – a public body set up by the Czech conservative government almost two decades after the communist regime's collapse.

When asked whether they actually spoke to Kundera, the historian Hradilek and the journalist Třešňák both said that they had faxed a list of questions to what they believed was the novelist's private fax number and decided to publish all documents after they had not received any response. Furthermore, it was revealed that one of the central figures of the whole case, Iva Militká, was Hradilek's relative. Militká was actually the person who let Dvořáček stay in her student room in 1950. She informed Hradilek that her then boyfriend and later husband Miroslav Dlask told her on his deathbed that, at that time, he had told his friend Kundera about Dvořáček's presence in the dormitory and that Kundera logically had to be the one who reported it to the police.

Instead of historical research, we thus have a possible love triangle almost worthy of Kundera's novel – Dvořáček staying in Militká's room while her boyfriend Dlask shared the information with his friend Kundera who, according to Dlask's version revealed to Hradilek by Dlask's wife Militká, informed the police. Instead of investigative journalism supported by historical science and further evidence, we have a web of personal interests fabricated into a scandalous and scandalizing story.

Kundera, forced into making a public statement, compared the magazine's treatment to 'the assassination of an author' and said that he had nothing to do with the whole saga. He thus refused to give in to pressure from the media and the young historian Hradilek to 'cooperate in the interest of historical truth'. It is as if the irony of history was catching up with the novelist yet again – this time the irony of postcommunist history of 'dealing with the communist past' by seeking to bring him to another public trial. Kundera's silence and refusal to respond to the magazine's set of questions was bizarrely taken as another indication of possible guilt, exactly according to the obscene logic of the world governed by noise in which silence is a crime.

The Institute, public knowledge and neurotic collective memory

The establishment of the *Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes* almost twenty years after the 1989 revolution and its role of institutionally framing the nation's collective memory and producing a requisite body of authoritative public knowledge show how prominent the past has become in the present political and ideological struggles and how moral arguments are designed to be won through the authority of public bodies.

The state in which a political institution pretends to act as a mental institution, disciplining and morally prescribing the collective body of a polity is impossible to explain by merely using some kind of Durkheimian methodology and concepts of collective memory and identity. The constitution of public bodies such as the Institute, especially their claim of scientific research based legitimacy indicates that this institutional setting is designed to produce a specific and morally definite body of public knowledge.

This demonstrates the importance of knowledge rather than memory and morality rather than law. If we accept Michel Foucault's claim that sovereignty was typical of the rule of absolutist monarchy while modernity created new forms of governmentality based on policing and social discipline, we have to conclude that the Institute's organization and functions, rather than legal justice typical of courts, are closer to the policing and disciplining of public morality.

This policing function of the Institute came to its full force during theKundera affair, when the novelist was scandalized not so much for what he allegedly did or did not do in 1950 but because he refused to communicate with the Institute's researchers in 2008. Thus, the production of public knowledge does not grant any *right to silence*. Those in charge of producing the public knowledge can use any method of extracting missing facts of the past, including the orchestrated provocation of a suspect by speculating about his possible guilt in the mass media.

The guilt of keeping silent about one's personal history is unforgivable for those searching for the Truth and feeling entitled to reveal it to the rest of society. 'If Kundera is not guilty, why does not he speak to us?' asked those behind the scandal. In a world governed by media noise, silence is always suspicious, if not even criminal. Unsurprisingly, the Institute came under heavy fire from academic historians, politicians including those from the conservative right-wing parties, and the general public.

The Kundera case is not important because it would be a 'celebrity author caught naked' kind of tabloid scandal managed by state-paid historians searching for and authorizing an official truth about the communist past. It is important because it shows that the postcommunist regime's production of public knowledge about the communist past cannot eliminate a fundamental discursive conflict between personal stories and official history. The case mainly proved that even postcommunist societies consider as suspicious and untrustworthy those individuals who carefully protect their private life and personal history, and remain unwilling to collaborate with political institutions set up to 'clarify and understand the communist past'. The typically modern struggle of a man against the public intrusion into his private life, so extreme during communist times, thus carries on in the form of *postcommunist neurotic collective memory*.

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